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ABSTRACT

A model of the generation of initial trusting attitudes toward groups by individuals who were not members of those groups was developed from the literature on interpersonal trust. The model proposed that perceptions of situational threat would be preconditions to the saliency of trust as a concept. Given that trust was a salient concept, the model predicted that competence, motivation, and openness would serve as independent determinants of trusting attitudes. A test of the model involving 319 college students provided support for the model. Under conditions of high threat, each of the three factors predicted variation in trusting attitudes and no significant interaction effects were observed. Under conditions of low threat, manipulation of the three variables made no difference in determining trusting attitudes. The findings show that initial trust of groups in threatening situations can be predicted from perceptions of competence, motivation, and openness. (FL)

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NONMEMBER TRUST OF A GROUP

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NONMEMBER TRUST OF A GROUP

While being characterized as "slippery" and "elusive" by more than one writer, trust has long been considered an important component of interpersonal communication.[1] Typical studies of trust in communication have related trust to cooperative behavior,[2] to credibility,[3] to group process,[4] to self-disclosure,[5] and to the development of healthy relationships.[6]

Wheeless has characterized research on trust as focusing on one of three areas: (1) risky situations, (2) dependent or risky behaviors, or (3) favorable perceptions of others.[7] While each of these dimensions undoubtedly plays a role in the process of developing and maintaining interpersonal trust, exactly how each role is played out has been more difficult to determine.

Two models of interpersonal trust have attempted to wrestle with that problem. The first model, by Kee and Knox,[8] begins with the general notion of "previous experience:" that is, a person (P)'s experience with another (O) will dictate initial levels of trust. If there is no previous experience, situational factors (e.g., incentive, power, characteristics of O) and dispositional factors (e.g., P's personality and generalized levels of trust) will control initial perceptions. These two factors may also influence the effects of personal experience. The initial perception is then moderated by perceptions of O's motives and/or O's conpetence within the situation. If these are found to be favorable, subjective trust is enhanced, which, in turn, leads to trust behavior.

The other model, by Pearce,[9] modified the Kee and Knox model to fit the interpersonal communication situation. Beginning with the assumption that situational factors dictate when trust is a salient concept, Pearce contended that these factors are (1) contingency, or a degree of "riskiness" that is present or perceived, (2) predictatbility, or the degree to which P is certain that O will or will not take advantabe of P's trusting behavior, and (3) alternative options, or the ability of P to discern that both trust and suspicion are possible behavioral choices within the situation. The predictability factor seems to account for both of Kee and Knox's "past experience" and "dispositional" factors. Pearce proceeded to add perceptions of O as knowledgeable, competent and well-intentioned as preconditions to what he called a "cognitive state of trust." The description of this state is similar to what we shall call a "trusting attitude." Pearce noted that people do not always behave in accordance with their attitudes and contended that trusting behavior would not be a result of a cognitive state of trust.

While these models and supporting research seem to indicate that a trusting attitude and trusting behavior can be distinguished in interpersonal relationships, almost no attention has been paid to the issue of whether trust can be exhibited toward entities other than individual persons. Intuition tells us that a trusting attitude can be exhibited toward any object (e.g., group, organization or institution) having the capacity to act toward us, and that lack of trusting attitudes can lead to distructive actions. Examples of this phenomenon are many and varied. Unwillingness to cooperate with a police officer may be a product of lack of trust for police in general. A campaign against an oil profits tax on the California

ballot argued that the measure would be defeated because the revenue would be placed in the hands of "the bumblers." Almost any corporate manager can recount a story of an experiment in participative decision-making that failed because the group charged with making the decision was not "trusted" by the people who would be affected by that decision.

The purpose of this research was then two-fold. First, a modification of existing models was undertaken to account for the situation in which an individual's trust of a group would be salient. Second, a preliminary test of the model was conducted.

THE MODEL

For purposes of parsimony, it was assumed that the trusting individual (P) had no previous experience with the group that was the object of trust (G). The focus of the model was placed on the development of a trusting attitude toward the group, rather than on the exhibition of trusting behavior.

While individual dispositions may have an impact on the degree to which any given P will trust groups in general, these dispositions should be distributed normally in the population and should thus have little or no systematic impact on trusting attitudes. Designating situational factors which make trusting attitudes salient is thus the model's primary task. Certainly, the situation should be a risky one, but what makes a group risky for an individual who is not a member of it? General notions of the concept of risk might lead us to speculate that such a group must have both (1) the ability to affect the individual in either a positive or a negative fashion and (2) that uncertainty exists as to what effect the course of the group's action will have on the nonmember. This combination of factors might be

labeled "potential for threat," and, following Pearce, it might be argued that perception of threat is a precondition for saliency of a trusting attitude.

Once it becomes meaningful to develop a trusting attitude, three factors would appear to influence the direction and degree that attitude takes. Two of the factors, competence and motivation, appear in both the Kee-Knox and Pearce models,[10] and these two factors also appear in Redding's review of trust in the organizational setting.[11] The third factor is drawn from the literature on self-disclosure's relationship with trust.[12] If openness engenders trust in many interpersonal situations, it would seem that a group which both operated openly and which was open to messages from nonmembers would would be affected by its actions would also be likely to engender trust within those nonmembers.

Figure 1 about here

A pictorialization of the previous discussion appears in Figure 1. To summarize, the model postulates that threat of G's action toward P is a precondition to the salience of a trusting attitude of P toward G. Once that attitude is a salient one, its direction and intensity will depend on P's perceptions of G's competence, motivation and openness.

To test this model, then, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: Under conditions of high perceived threat, there will be significant main effects on trusting attitudes for levels of competence, motiva-

tion and openness.

H_2: Under conditions of low perceived threat, there will be no significant main effects on trusting attitudes for levels of competence, motivation and openness.

METHOD

Subjects - Subjects were 319 students enrolled in lower division speech communication classes at _____. Courses used in the study satisfy general education requirements and thus enroll a wide variety of students. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of sixteen treatment conditions.

Treatment - Each of the four independent variables, threat, competence, motivation and openness, were divided into high and low conditions. A situation was constructed which stipulated that the subject was to take the perspective of an employee with three years' seniority in a corporation undergoing financial difficulties. The president of the corporation had just appointed a committee to investigate the difficulties. From that premise, the subject was presented with one of sixteen different descriptions of the committee.

Threat was manipulated by varying the president's charge to the committee. In the high threat condition, the committee was instructed both to lay off employees and to decide which employees would be terminated. In the low threat condition, the committee was instructed to make recommendations about economies but was specifically forbidden from recommending lay-offs.

Competence was manipulated at the perceptual level. In both conditions, the subject's supervisor made a statement about the competence of the com-

mittee, which, according to the case, the subordinate had taken to heart. In the high competence condition, the supervisor had remarked that the five best people for the job had been picked, and in the low competence condition the supervisor had labeled the committee as the five worst people for the job.

Motivation was also manipulated at the perceptual level. In the positive motivation condition, the case stipulated that the subject had perceived the members of the committee to be exceptionally committed to the good of the company. In the negative motivation condition, the material indicated that the subject perceived the committee's members to be pursuing individual interests and to have "pet" subordinates.

Openness was manipulated through the actions of the committee. In the open condition, the committee had communicated its progress to nonmembers via regular bulletins and instituted procedures to insure that it received suggestions from the rest of the organization. In the closed condition, the group maintained secrecy about its progress, and rumors were the only available source of information.

Each of the manipulations had been tested on a pilot sample drawn from the same population as had the eventual subjects. Based on comments drawn from the pilot study, initial drafts of the treatments were revised both to heighten differences and to increase plausability, especially in situations where manipulations were not consistent with one another.

Procedures - Each subject received a booklet containing case materials, a measure of trust, and scales designed to check manipulations. Subjects were informed that the study's purpose was to determine some effects of "group process" in organizations and that the case materials varied from

subject to subject. After subjects completed the items, the nature of the study was discussed and questions were answered.

The trust measure consisted of fourteen semantic differential-type items drawn from Giffin's Trust Differential.[13] Originally, fifteen items had been selected, but one item was eliminated after a pilot administration due to low correlation with total score. Coefficient alpha relaiability was computed to be .88 in the pilot sample and .86 when the study was conducted. The items were varied in direction in order to avoid response setting.

Manipulations were assessed through a series of four questions, one for each of the independent variables. Subjects were asked to respond to these questions on a seven point semantic-differential-type scale with either "high" or "positive" at one end and "low" or "negative" at the other end.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks - To determine whether each independent variable had been perceived as intended, t-tests were computed between conditions for each of the four manipulation items. In all cases, t values exceeded the .001 level of significance.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for each condition on its respective item. It should be noted that, in addition to being different from each other, means for all independent variables except threat were situated on the appropriate side of the scale's midpoint.

Tests of hypotheses - Since the threat was considered to be a precondition for hypothesis purposes, it was not included in the ANOVA model. Rather, separate 2x2x2 analyses of variance were computed for each of the high threat and low threat conditions.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 presents means and standard deviations on the trust scale for each level of the three independent variables in both the high and low threat conditions. In the high threat condition, all three independent variables produced significant main effects (Competence: $F = 20.849$, $p = .001$, $eta^2 = .34$; Motivation: $F = 9.193$, $p = .003$, $eta^2 = .23$; Openness: $F = 4.738$, $p = .031$, $eta^2 = .16$; $R^2 = .158$). One interaction, competence by motivation, approached significance ($p = .066$); all other interactions were nonsignificant. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

In the low threat condition, significant main effects were produced for competence and motivation (Competence: $F = 20.285$ $p = .001$, $eta^2 = .35$. Motivation: $F = 21.553$, $p = .001$, $eta^2 = .36$; $R^2 = .183$). No main effect was observed for openness ($F = 1.206$, $p = .274$, power = .70 for small effects and .99 for medium and large effects). The competence by openness interaction approached significance, and no other significant interactions were observed.

Recall, however, that subjects consistently distorted their perceptions of threat as compared to their perceptions of the other independent variables. Thus, a better test of Hypothesis 2 would have been provided by

examining only those subjects who perceived the threat condition as intended. Albeit selecting only those subjects checking positions from the midpoint to the low end of the scale eliminated all but thirty-five individuals, that number was still sufficient for scruitinizing main effects.

Table 3 about here

Table 3 lists means and standard deviations on the trust scale produced by this more selective group for each independent variable. Analysis of variance results indicated that no significant main effects were generated (Competence: $F = 2.608$, $p = .116$; Motivation: $F = .606$, $p = .442$; Openness: $F = .137$, $p = .714$; power for all tests = .21 for small effects, .83 for medium effects and .99 for large effects). Using this second analysis, then, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

DISCUSSION

A model of the generation of initial trusting attitudes toward groups by individuals who were not members of those groups was developed out of the literature on interpersonal trust. The model proposed that perceptions of situational threat would be preconditions to the saliency of trust as a concept. Given that trust was a salient concept, the model predicted that competence, motivation and openness would serve as independent determinants of trusting attitudes.

Evidence from a test of the model provided support for its structure. Under conditions of high threat, each of the three factors predicted var-

iation in trusting attitudes, and no significant interaction effects were observed. Under conditions of low threat (employing only those subjects who perceived the situation accurately), manipulation of the three independent variables made no differences in determining trusting attitudes.

While these results are encouraging, they also point to theoretical weaknesses which need to be developed and strengthened through further research. Theses weaknesses and their accompanying directions for research will be discussed in the paragraphs which follow.

First, a clarification of the concept of situational threat seems to be in order. In the present study, high threat was operationalized by the group's ability to affect the subject in a negative manner and by uncertainty as to how that power would be used. Low threat, on the other hand, was operationalized by withholding from the group the power to lay off the subject and by stipulating that this lack of power was a certainty. Yet, most of the subjects in the low threat condition perceived the situation as being somewhat threatening, even if the level of threat was not up to those of the high threat condition. There are at least three explainations for such distortion. First, subjects in the low threat condition may have perceived that trust was the dependent variable, and since trust could not be salient without some form of threat, the situation was distorted to provide that threat. Second, irregardless of the presence of trust as a dependent variable, subjects may have perceived some other form of threat in the simple existence of a committee which is designed to investigate a matter of potential negative impact on both the organization and on the subject. Third, the conception of threat as consisting of power and uncertainty over how that power will be used may be inadequate. Other factors may contribute to the

to the perception of a situation as being threatening, and continuing research might focus its efforts on elaborating the preconditions for threatening situations.

A second cautionary note emerging from these data is that the model's utility may lie only in the prediction of initial trusting attitudes. These attitudes are certainly subject to modification as interaction between person and group proceeds, and certain clues in the data support indications that the independence of the factors from each other may not hold beyond initial impressions. For example, when perceptions of the degree of threat were lowered somewhat, openness dropped out as an independent variable, with some indication ($p < .10$) being present that it interacted with competence instead. There was also a nonsignificant ($p < .10$) trend toward an interaction between competence and motivation in the high threat condition.

Some practical evidence of how trusting attitudes can be modified through interaction can be found in the regulation by Congress of the C.I.A. For many years, the C.I.A. was perceived as a highly competent group of individuals who were working "for the good of the country." As a result, trusting attitudes were apparent, and the C.I.A.'s argument that it could not be very open about its operations was readily accepted. As evidence accumulated that the C.I.A. was not necessarily in agreement with the Congress about what was the "good of the country" Congress responded by showing less trust of the agency and demanding more openness concerning its operations. Of late, the pendulum seems to have swung in the opposite direction again, with the C.I.A. claiming to be more in tune with the country's priorities than previously while arguing that it should be both trusted and allowed to return to work in a less open manner. In practice, then, it is quite likely

that interaction among the variables modifies trusting attitudes, with one or more of the variables assuming greater or lesser importance than others as the situation changes. Research could focus on how the dynamics of interaction modifies trusting attitudes.

Finally, despite the fact that theoretical underpinnings of the model were drawn from the literature on interpersonal trust, support for the model cannot be generalized to all interpersonal situations. The person-group relationship implied in this model is a complementary one , and so the model may also hold for other complementary relationships such as superior amd subordinate or teacher and student. Yet, it makes little conceptual sense to apply the model to symmetrical relationships. How, for example, is the situation threatening in such relationships? When the relationship is not based on a task, how is competence assessed? How is one to determine the degree to which another individual is positively or negatively motivated, and what is the object of the motivation? Only openness (in terms of willingness to disclose and to receive disclosure) seems to make any sense in this situation. Perhaps initial trusting attitudes in casual relationships are determined by a whole different set of variables (e.g., attraction, homophily). Subsequent investigation would do well to integrate the literature on initial interaction in casual relationships with the literature on trust.

For the present, however, it is useful to know that initial trust of groups in threatening situations can be predicted from perceptions of competence, motivation and openness. Those charged with assembling groups where high levels of initial trust by those outside of the group are essential to the success of the group's task would do well to recruit individuals who

will be perceived as being highly competent to undertake the task, who will be perceived as working for the good of the whole rather than for individual gain, and who will be willing to give to and receive from nonmembers information pertinent to the group's progress toward a solution.

NOTES

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[6]J.R. Gibb, Trust: A New View of Personal and Organizational Development (Los Angeles: The Guild of Tutors Press, 1978).

[7]Wheeless, p. 143.

[8]H.W. Kee and R.E. Knox, "Conceptual and Methodlogical Considerations in the Study of Trust and Suspicion," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 14 (1970), 357-366.

[9]W.B. Pearce, "Trust in Interpersonal Communication," SM, 41 (1974), 236-244.

[10]Pearce's use of "knowledgeable" is not distinguished from "competent" in his explaination of the model; in this situation the two concepts appear to be functionally identical.

[11]W.C. Redding, Communication Within the Organization (New York and Lafayette, Indiana: Industrial Communication Council and Purdue Research Foundation, 1972), pp. 280-329.

[12]Wheeles and Grotz; Wheeless.

[13]K. Giffin, The Trust Differential Lawrence: University of Kansas Communication Research Center, 1968). The fourteen items were: STRONG/WEAK, QUALIFIED/UNQUALIFIED, OPENMINDED/CLOSEMINDED, UNSELFISH/SELFISH, RELIABLE/

UNRELIABLE, AUTHORITATIVE/UNAUTHORITATIVE, HONEST/DISHONEST, EFFECTIVE/INEFFECTIVE, STABLE/UNSTABLE, INFORMED/UNINFORMED, TRUSTWORTHY/UNTRUSTWORTHY, EXPERT/IGNORANT, FRANK/RESERVED, FAIR/UNFAIR.

FIGURE 1

A Model of Nonmember Trust of a Group

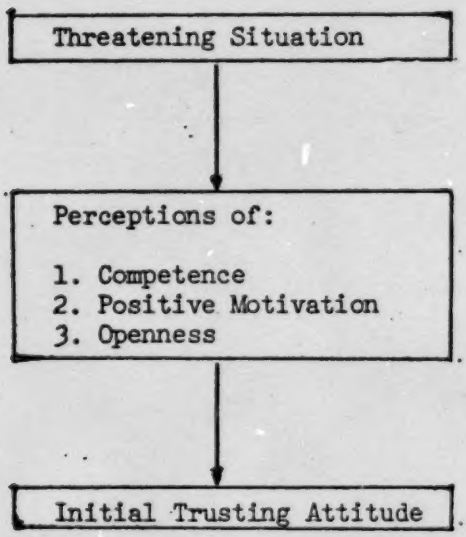

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Case Counts
For Manipulation Check Items

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Threat			
High	2.1585	1.050	164
Low	2.6194	1.180	155
Competence			
High	3.6747	1.562	166
Low	4.6013	1.545	153
Motivation			
Positive	3.4248	1.880	153
Negative	4.6566	1.556	166
Openness			
Open	3.2582	1.700	182
Closed	6.1679	1.198	137

Scale: 1 = high or positive; 7 = low or negative

TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Case Counts
For Factors of Trust Under High and Low Threat Conditions

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
HIGH THREAT:			
Competence			
High	50.048	12.994	84
Low	58.800	14.574	80
Motivation			
Positive	52.582	14.531	79
Negative	55.929	14.228	85
Openness			
Open	52.047	12.789	86
Closed	56.821	15.749	78
LOW THREAT:			
Competence			
High	50.110	14.025	82
Low	56.904	11.293	73
Motivation			
Positive	49.946	13.393	74
Negative	56,383	12,350	81
Openess			
Open	52.635	12.902	96
Closed	54.407	12.752	59

Potential Range: 14 (highest) to 98 (lowest)

TABLE 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Case Counts
For Factors of Trust Under Nondistorted Low Threat Conditions

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Competence			
High	44.000	10.599	13
Low	51.727	12.236	22
Motivation			
Positive	50.950	12.841	20
Negative	46.067	10.833	15
Openness			
Open	48.000	12.536	22
Closed	50.308	11.679	13

Potential Range: 14 (highest) to 98 (lowest)